Pair of Boro baseball players will make tour of Cuba

By JOE PALLADINO
Sports Editor

When a Sandy Koufax All Star baseball team makes a goodwill tour of Cuba in February of 1994, 20 ball players age 14 and 15 from seven area communities will be making the journey, including two from Naugatuck.

Derek Ostuni and Joe Dinneny, both from the borough, are among a select group of players who will play five exhibition games in Cuba as part of the continuing "Friendship Series" which began last summer.

Intersport USA, which has sent athletic teams around the world, is taking care of the bureaucratic red tape of the trip, and head coach Frank Maffia is handling the baseball chores.

"We've got kids from Waterbury, Naugatuck, Cheshire, Watertown, Wolcott, Bethlehem and Thomaston," he said of the 20 kids chosen from the 40 who came to tryouts back in October. "I think we may have lost a few kids because they were leary about going to Cuba. That may have kept a few away."

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— Joe Dinneny

But for the 20 who made the cut, February 18 marks the beginning of their international odyssey which will see them play five games in eight days.

This opportunity to go to Cuba," is what Dinneny describes as the reason he tried out for the team. "I didn't think I had a shot. But the day of the first practice the coach called and told me I made it. My Mom and Dad were really excited."

"I heard about the tryout from Joe Dinneny," Ostuni said. Just getting the chance to measure himself against some of the better players in the area was his first concern.

"I didn't think I would make the team at first," he added. "But I think he took me because of my pitching. When they first called and said I made the team, we were going nuts.

"I was shocked."

A total of 35 people will be going, with four coaches, eight chaperones and three representatives from Intersport, for the sightseeing, cultural activities, and of course, baseball.

"We will be meeting with a representative from the Cuban consulate, and he'll give us the do's and dont's," reports Maffia. "We hope to see the good and the bad. The kids will get a chance to see how the other half lives."

Maffia reports that most of the kids saw the Cuban National junior team in their U.S. tour last summer, and they were impressed by the level of play.

"I expect to play top notch teams down there," and it's Maffia task to blend this unit together over the next three months — despite the winter weather.

"Everybody is starting to fit in together," observed Ostuni. "We can't hit a lot," he said of the frigid weekend practice sessions. "But we do a lot of base running, and work on pick-offs. Our coach hopes to get a gym for two or three hours on a Saturday."

"Until we get a gym, we'll just have to brave the cold," Maffia reports.

"We have gotten in some infield and outfield, and some drills," adds Dinneny, who should see some action on the pitchers mound, and perhaps in right field. Ostuni will also pitch for the Greater Waterbury All Stars, most of whom played Sandy Koufax baseball this past year.

"I expect to surprise a few people," said a confident Maffia. "We've got to blend the team together. I think we'll be able to compete with the Cubans. Everybody has been telling me they will destroy us. But our kids don't think like that. We will surprise a few teams."

Winning is the prime objective when you take a baseball diamond, but for Dinneny, it's just one small part of the experience.

"I want to learn more about baseball, and get a better attitude about the game. And I like these coaches. They are some of the best coaches I've had," said the Naugy High School freshman.

Ostuni, also an NHS freshman, brings a typical Naugatuck sporting outlook to the series.

"I want to go down and beat them."

Enough said.

But to get there, it will cost $1,500 per person. "I don't want it to be an expense that the kids have to bear," insists Maffia, with the total cost of the trip more than $35,000.

But it will cost money even to continue indoor training. One area owner of an indoor batting facility has offered the use of the cages — for half price.

The players are out selling booster tickets at $10 each, the parents are working on a fund-raising dinner, and area businesses will be contacted for donations.

"If everyone helped just a little, we'll raise the money in no time at all," said Maffia, "and we really haven't received any negative responses at all yet.

"This will be an experience the kids will remember all their lives, and I don't mean just the baseball part. That's my concern, the baseball, but they will experience a different culture. That's all part of it."

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Donations to help defray the cost of the trip can be sent to: Intersport USA, Inc., Waterbury CT, 06722. Or you can also get more information by contacting Maffia (756-2082), or Don Ensero, the Intersport baseball coordinator (575-1511).

Here is the current roster for the Greater Waterbury All Stars: Ed Acosta, Nick Biga, Nick Buchoore, Matt Cashman, Joe Dinneny, Matt D'Occhio, Jay Dunne, Dave Gelinas, Mike Girouard, co-captain Mike Guerrera, Kevin Lukosevage, Luke Mitkowski, Chad Monnerat, Brenin Mucci, Mike Orsini, Derek Ostuni, Joe Palumbo, co-captain Victor Rinaldi, Kyle Rose, Branden Strileckis. Team Manager Frank Maffia, Coach Pete Palumbo, Coach Bruce Dayton.

Photo by Joe Palladino

Head Coach Frank Maffia, left, and Naugatuck's Derek Ostuni, enjoy a chilly chat during a recent baseball workout. Ostuni, and fellow Naugatuckian Joe Dinneny, are part of an all star team of greater Waterbury players who will travel to Cuba next February for a goodwill baseball tour.

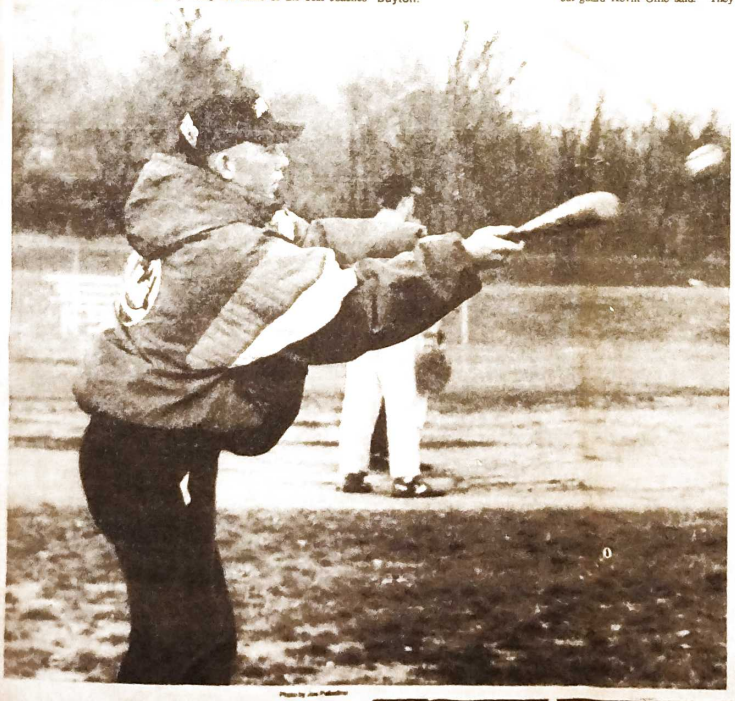

Photo by Joe Palladino

Joe Dinneny works out during a brisk Autumn Saturday as he prepares to travel to Cuba with a team of Waterbury area all stars next February. Dinneny and Naugatuck's Derek Ostuni are the borough's representatives.

Huskies run roughshod over Cavs

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. (AP) — Virginia was already facing plenty of pressure. Connecticut decided to see how the Cavaliers would respond to a little bit more.

The Huskies used an overpowering fast break and swarming pressure defense to roll to a 77-36 victory over No. 12 Virginia on Monday night, the Cavaliers' worst loss in the 29-year history of University Hall.

"Virginia's ranked. We're not. They have four starters back and they're playing at home," Connecticut guard Kevin Ollie said. "They made it to the sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament last year. We got beat in the first round of the NIT.

"All the pressure was on them, and that made it easier for us to just come in here and play our game."

Connecticut's pressure on both ends of the floor proved too much for the Cavaliers to handle from the outset, and the Huskies (2-0) never let Virginia make any kind of sustained run in its season opener.

After it was over, the Cavaliers left the floor to a cascade of boos, leaving coach Jeff Jones to wonder how a team that won 21 games last season could become so inept so fast.

"I want to apologize to everybody who was here tonight for having to sit through something like that. We stunk the place up," he said. "I don't have answers as to why, but I can assure you we'll try to find some — fast."

Ollie had three baskets and an assist as Connecticut bolted to a 10-0 lead, with eight points coming on fast breaks.

By halftime, the Huskies had scored 22 fast break points and were up 44-15.

Connecticut's opening basket of the second half came on a fast break, and the Huskies went on to build their lead to 66-22 with 8:50 left.

Connecticut finished with 32 fast break points and had a 59-25 advantage in rebounds and an 18-4 edge in assists.

Virginia, which made just 12 of 53 field-goal attempts — 22.6 percent — scored its fewest points ever at University Hall. The losing margin was the Cavaliers' largest since they dropped a 99-73 decision to Kentucky in 1965, in the first game ever played in the building.

What bothered Jones most was that Connecticut hadn't surprised Virginia.

"They did exactly what we anticipated," he said. "We were prepared for the press and for everything else they did. We just got outplayed."

"I've been there," Connecticut coach Jim Calhoun said. "We took a 16-1 team into Madison Square Garden and lost by 33 points (to St. John's), so I sympathize with Jeff. But I must say that during the game, I wasn't feeling any sympathy."

Freshman Ray Allen led the Huskies with 20 points. Donyell Marshall had 17 points and nine rebounds, and Ollie had 16 points and six assists.

Virginia point guard Cory Alexander, the Cavaliers' leader in scoring and assists last season, was scoreless when he went down with an injury to his right ankle with 8:44 left in the first half. But by that point, Virginia was already down by 14.

"We were prepared to press all night, to jam them inside and make them look for Cory Alexander," Calhoun said. "I think we hit them with a flash knockout, and they had trouble getting their legs. By the time they did get their legs, they didn't have Cory Alexander."

Jones said it was too early to determine the extent of the injury to Alexander's ankle, which he said would be re-examined today.

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